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Gateway to Sixteenth-Century Joseon: The Turtle Ship in Contemporary South Korean Cinema

ABSTRACT: *This article examines the development of the Turtle Ship during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897), its tactical importance in the Imjin War between Korea and Japan (1592–1598), and its status as a gateway to South Korean historical cinema. Based on period records—including the Joseon Wangjo Sillok, Admiral Yi Soon-Shin's diaries and memorials and Ryu Seong-ryong's Jingbirok—as well as recent scholarship, it first analyzes the vessel's tactical role in Joseon naval campaigns and then evaluates its modern cinematic portrayals in Kim Han-Min's trilogy and the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) television series "The Immortal Yi Soon-Shin," arguing that these visual dramatizations, while stylized, enhance the public understanding of Korean history, reinforce national identity, and connect sixteenth-century innovation to contemporary cultural memory.*

KEYWORDS: *early modern history; Korean history; Joseon dynasty; Imjin War; naval warfare; Turtle Ship (Geobukseon); Yi Soon-Shin; Kim Han-Min; cultural history; history of cinema*

Introduction

The Turtle Ship or *Geobukseon* [거북선] holds a prominent place in Korean historical memory and is widely regarded as a symbol of ingenuity and resilience during the Imjin War [임진왜란] (1592–1598), a protracted conflict initiated by Japan's attempted invasion of the Korean Peninsula. Under the leadership of Admiral Yi Soon-Shin [이순신] (1545–1598), one of Korea's most celebrated military commanders, the Joseon Navy played a decisive role in resisting the forces of the Japanese warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), whose long-term ambition was to conquer Ming China (1368–1644) by first subjugating Korea. A major factor in Korea's naval success was Admiral Yi's systematic disruption of Japanese supply lines, which significantly hampered the enemy's inland progress. In response to the shifting demands of maritime warfare, Admiral Yi oversaw the development of the Turtle Ship, a purpose-built vessel intended to counter Japanese boarding tactics and maximize Joseon's artillery capabilities. Although the ship's active deployment was relatively limited, it remains a lasting emblem of Korea's naval innovation and Admiral Yi's military acumen.

Despite its iconic status in Korea, the Turtle Ship remains relatively obscure to audiences outside East Asia. This article highlights the vessel's historical significance and introduces it as a lens through which broader aspects of Korean history can be explored. As a combat vessel, the Turtle Ship exemplifies strategic adaptation, reinforcing the strengths of the Joseon Navy while addressing its vulnerabilities in close-quarters combat. Its legacy has expanded far beyond the circumstances of the Imjin War, and it has become a cultural symbol that continues to resonate in contemporary Korea. In recent decades, the Turtle Ship has gained renewed visibility through South Korean media. Films like *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* (2014), directed by Kim Han-Min, and the television series *The Immortal Yi Soon-Shin* (2004–2005), directed by Lee Sung-Joo and Kim Jung-Gyu, have dramatized its role, often blending historical facts with creative interpretations. While these portrayals sometimes sacrifice strict accuracy, they perform an important cultural function by making historical narratives accessible to broader audiences and reinforcing national identity. I examine how

such representations shape the public understanding of the Imjin War and enhance the Turtle Ship's symbolic power, particularly with regard to the long and complex history of Korean-Japanese relations. By focusing on both the Turtle Ship's battlefield utility in naval warfare during the Imjin War and its evolving depiction in modern South Korean visual media, I bridge the gap between historical scholarship and cultural storytelling. This dual lens serves to deepen an appreciation for Korea's history and helps explore how cinematic narratives influence collective memory and national pride.

Firsthand records like Admiral Yi's *Nanjung Diary* [난중일기]¹ and the official *Imjin Changch'o*² reports provide direct insight into naval operations. These sources are invaluable, particularly given Admiral Yi's dual role as both construction overseer and commander of the Turtle Ship. However, each source also presents its challenges. The *Nanjung Diary*, while rich in detail, reflects Yi's personal viewpoint and focuses primarily on tactical events, thus offering limited analysis of larger political dynamics. Meanwhile, the *Imjin Changch'o*, though an official wartime record, presents selective narratives shaped by bureaucratic priorities. Broader chronicles like the *Jingbirok* [징비록],³ authored by the Prime Minister Ryu Seong-Ryong [유성룡] (1542–1607), and the *Joseon Wangjo Sillok* [조선왕조실록],⁴ the dynastic annals of the Joseon court, provide wider political context but traditionally emphasize civil administration rather than military specifics. Despite their efforts to maintain a modicum of objectivity⁵—at least by premodern standards, these records occasionally exhibit bias or omissions,⁶ thus underscoring the need for careful cross-referencing.

Modern Korean historians have produced extensive scholarship on Admiral Yi and the Imjin War's naval dimensions. Park Hee-Bong addresses common misconceptions surrounding the Turtle Ship's battlefield role,⁷ while Lee Duk-Il examines political factions within the Joseon court,⁸ including Ryu Seong-Ryong's strategic endorsement of Admiral Yi.⁹ Hwang Hyun-Pil offers a comprehensive study of Yi's naval campaigns, synthesizing fragmented historical records to reconstruct Joseon naval strategy.¹⁰ However, a recurring challenge with regard to Korean-language scholarship is its limited accessibility to non-Korean readers. Moreover,

¹ Yi Soon-Shin [이순신], *Nanjung Diary* [난중일기], ed. Kim Sung Min (iWell Contents, 2014); Yi Sun-sin, *Nanjung Ilgi: War Diary of Admiral Yi Sun-sin*, ed. Sohn Pow-key, trans. Ha Tae-hung (Yonsei University Press, 1977). For Korean-language works, author (or director) and title are referenced in both English and Korean at their first appearance in the footnotes; all subsequent short citations appear in English only.

² Yi Sun-sin, *Imjin Changch'o: Admiral Yi Sun-Sin's Memorials to Court*, ed. Lee Chong-young, trans. Ha Tae-hung (Yonsei University Press, 1981).

³ Ryu Seong-ryong [유성룡], *Jingbirok* [징비록] [*The Book of Correction*], ed. Gu Ji-Hyun (Olje, 2015).

⁴ *Joseon Wangjo Sillok* [조선왕조실록] [*The Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty*], [online](#).

⁵ National Library of Korea, *Documents of the Joseon Royal Family*, [online](#).

⁶ National Institute of Korean History, *Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty*, [online](#).

⁷ Park Hee-Bong [박희봉], *Gyogwaseoga Malhaji Aneun Imjinwaeran Iyagi* [교과서가말하지않은임진왜란이야기] [*The Story of the Imjin War Not Told in the Textbooks*] (Non-Hyung, 2014).

⁸ Lee Duk-Il [이덕일], *Nanseui hyeoksillideo: Ryu Seong-Ryong* [난세의혁신리더:유성룡] [*Revolutionary Leader in Times of Chaos: Ryu Seong-Ryong*] (Wisdom House, 2000).

⁹ Ryu Seong-ryong, *Jingbirok*, 28.

¹⁰ Hwang Hyun-Pil [황현필], *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada: Geu badaneun mueoseul samkyeonna* [이순신의바다:그바다는무엇을삼켰나] [*Yi Soon-Shin's Ocean: What Was He Able to Accomplish?*] (Yeokbyeon, 2021).

while these studies provide rich contextual analysis, they often treat the Turtle Ship itself as a secondary element within their broader narratives of Admiral Yi's leadership—an imbalance this present study addresses by foregrounding the vessel's combat role.

Despite Korea's long-standing influence in East Asian history, its contributions are often overshadowed by narratives centered on China and Japan. Episodes such as Goguryeo's [고구려] (37 BCE–668 CE) successful defense against the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) and Baekje's [백제] (18 BCE–660 CE) role in transmitting cultural innovations to early Japan demonstrate Korea's historical significance, yet these events remain underrepresented in global scholarship. Accordingly, English-language research on the Imjin War also remains comparatively sparse. Kenneth Swope's 2009 monograph, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail*, provides a detailed account of Ming China's involvement,¹¹ while Lee Ji-Young's 2016 book, *China's Hegemony*, analyzes the tributary system's influence on regional diplomacy.¹² These studies offer valuable geopolitical context, but they often foreground Chinese and Japanese perspectives at the expense of Korea's military and strategic contributions. Japanese-focused scholarship, including Mikiso Hane's and Louis G. Perez's 2015 survey, explores Toyotomi Hideyoshi's domestic motivations.¹³ Meanwhile, Giuseppe Marino and Rebekah Clements examine the rivalries between key Japanese commanders, including Konishi Yukinaga (1558–1600) and Kato Kiyomasa (1562–1611), in a 2023 article.¹⁴ While Swope has acknowledged the Turtle Ship's significance in a series of publications,¹⁵ and Yi Min-Ung's chapter in James B. Lewis's 2014 edited volume, *The East Asian War, 1592–1598*, provides a rare focus on naval engagements,¹⁶ a detailed analysis of fleet composition, ship design, and battle logistics remains limited due to gaps in the surviving records. Thus, though it is widely recognized within Korea, the Turtle Ship has received comparatively limited attention in Western academic studies.¹⁷

Over the past two decades, South Korean film and television have significantly shaped public perceptions of the Turtle Ship. Director Kim Han-Min's recent trilogy—*The Admiral: Roaring*

¹¹ Kenneth M. Swope, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail: Ming China and the First Great East Asian War, 1592–1598* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2009).

¹² Ji-Young Lee, *China's Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

¹³ Mikiso Hane and Louis G. Perez, *Premodern Japan: A Historical Survey*, 2nd ed. (Westview Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Giuseppe Marino and Rebekah Clements, "Iberian Sources on the Imjin War: The *Relação do fim e remate que teve a guerra da Coreia* (1599)," *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 23, no. 1 (2023): 27–48.

¹⁵ Kenneth M. Swope, "Crouching Tigers, Secret Weapons: Military Technology Employed during the Sino-Japanese-Korean War, 1592–1598," *The Journal of Military History* 69, no. 1 (January 1, 2005): 11–41; Kenneth M. Swope, "Turning the Tide: The Strategic and Psychological Significance of the Liberation of Pyongyang in 1593," in *Warfare in China to 1600*, ed. Peter Lorge (Ashgate, 2005), 463–484; Kenneth M. Swope, "War and Remembrance: Yang Hao and the Siege of Ulsan of 1598," *Journal of Asian History* 42, no. 2 (2008): 165–195.

¹⁶ Min'Ung Yi, "The Role of the Chosŏn Navy and Major Naval Battles during the Imjin Waeran," in *The East Asian War, 1592–1598: International Relations, Violence, and Memory*, ed. James B. Lewis (Routledge, 2014), 120–140.

¹⁷ Marc Jason Gilbert, "Admiral Yi Sun-Shin, the Turtle Ships, and Modern Asian History," *Education about Asia* 12, no. 1 (Asia in World History: 1450–1770) (2007): 29, [online](#); Swope, *Dragon's Head*, 31; Swope, "Crouching Tigers," 14, 18.

Currents (2014), *Hansan: Rising Dragon* (2022), and *Noryang: Deadly Sea* (2023)—as well as the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) television series *The Immortal Yi Soon-Shin* (2004–2005), directed by Lee Sung-Joo and Kim Jung-Gyu, prominently feature the vessel, often emphasizing its symbolic power rather than strict historical accuracy. While dramatized, these portrayals serve as highly effective tools for public engagement, translating complex historical events into accessible visual narratives. Their limitations arise from narrative embellishments or simplifications, yet they also foster national pride and stimulate a broader interest in Korea's past. By reconstructing undocumented episodes, these productions contribute to the Turtle Ship's enduring legacy as both a historical artifact and a cultural icon.

Across both scholarly and popular sources, the Turtle Ship's tactical role remains underexplored. Much of the existing literature highlights Admiral Yi's leadership, with the vessel functioning primarily as a symbolic extension of his strategic genius rather than a subject of independent study. The limited duration of its wartime use and the scarcity of detailed naval records contribute to this oversight. This article repositions the Turtle Ship as a central topic by evaluating both its operational significance and its symbolic resonance in modern Korean identity. Using a combination of historical documentation and media analysis, it bridges the gap between academic inquiry and cultural representation. I argue that South Korean visual media portrayals of Admiral Yi and the Turtle Ship—particularly in *The Immortal Yi Soon-Shin* and Kim Han-Min's recent trilogy—serve a dual function: they make a pivotal historical period more accessible to contemporary audiences and reinforce cultural narratives of resilience and historical agency. While these dramatizations blend historical fact with creative license, their symbolic and educational value outweigh their minor inaccuracies as they foster national pride, challenge external distortions of Korean history, and invite a broader engagement with the country's past.

South Korean historical films and television dramas have emerged as influential media for public engagement with Korea's past, particularly for audiences who may not have access to or interest in academic texts. While dramatized, they serve as effective gateways to historical inquiry. By simplifying complex events and filling gaps left by incomplete records, cinematic portrayals make history more approachable, particularly for visual learners. Through emotionally charged storytelling and dynamic visual reconstruction, these productions communicate historical significance in ways that traditional scholarship may struggle to match. As such, historical cinematography plays a crucial role in introducing major historical topics to a broader audience.

Beyond their educational value, these portrayals contribute to the construction and reinforcement of national identity. The Turtle Ship, in particular, has transcended its original wartime role to become a symbol of Korean resilience and cultural pride. Its recurring presence in media reflects a broader effort to reclaim and assert Korea's historical agency, especially in response to external narratives that have minimized or distorted Korea's contributions. By presenting the Turtle Ship as a visual emblem of perseverance, these dramatizations help cultivate a collective sense of historical continuity and identity.

At the same time, media representations raise important questions about the balance between historical fidelity and artistic license. For example, the depiction of the Turtle Ship at the Battle of Myeongryang [명량대첩] (1597)—despite its documented absence—illustrates how narrative embellishments can serve symbolic rather than strictly factual purposes. While such deviations may draw criticism from historians, they also have the potential to spark curiosity and deepen public engagement with historical sources. When approached critically, these portrayals can complement scholarly research by encouraging audiences to explore Korea's complex historical legacy beyond the screen.

1. Historical Background: Naval Innovation and the Imjin War

The Turtle Ship, developed by Admiral Yi Soon-Shin during the late sixteenth century, represents one of Korea's most iconic military innovations. Its emergence must be understood within the broader context of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897), a period characterized by centralized governance, Neo-Confucian reform, and increasing maritime threats along the southern coast. Early naval development in Joseon was shaped by persistent raids from Japanese pirates (*wakō*), which prompted officials to adapt transport vessels such as the Maeng Ship [맹선] into combat-ready designs.¹⁸ By the mid-sixteenth century, the Pan-Ok Ship [판옥선] had become the Joseon Navy's primary warship.¹⁹ Featuring a dual-deck structure that separated rowers from combat personnel, the Pan-Ok Ship allowed for multi-directional cannon fire, a significant advantage in premodern East Asian naval warfare. However, its elevated design left crews vulnerable to Japanese boarding tactics.²⁰ In response, Admiral Yi modified the Pan-Ok Ship by adding a wooden roof with spikes²¹ and a dragon-shaped prow capable of firing cannon rounds, thereby creating the Turtle Ship. Final artillery tests were completed just one day before Japan's invasion in 1592,²² thus facilitating the vessel's immediate deployment in the upcoming wartime operations.

The Imjin War erupted in 1592 during a period of profound instability inside Joseon.²³ Factionalism—known as *bungdang jeongchi* [붕당정치]—had weakened the central authority,²⁴ as competing political factions disputed the succession, foreign policy, and internal reforms. These quarrels led to the marginalization of key advisors and delayed crucial decisions, including the appointment of a Crown Prince.²⁵ Diplomatic miscalculations further compounded the crisis: in 1591, a Joseon envoy had returned from Japan with conflicting

¹⁸ *Joseon Wangjo Sillok*, "King Sejong Records," King Sejong 12th year (1429), September 1, [online](#).

¹⁹ *Joseon Wangjo Sillok*, "King Myeongjong Records," King Myeongjong 12th year (1557), April 3, [online](#); Min'Ung Yi, "Role of the Chosŏn Navy," 122.

²⁰ Swope, "Crouching Tigers," 32.

²¹ Yi Soon-Shin, *Nanjung Diary*, 23.

²² Yi Soon-Shin, *Nanjung Diary*, 26; Yi Sun-sin, *Imjin Changch'o*, 16.

²³ Park Young-Gyu [박영규], *Han gwoneuro ingneun joseonwangjosillok* [한권으로읽는조선왕조실록] [*Reading the Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty in One Book*] (Woongjin ThinkBig Co., Ltd., 2017), 418.

²⁴ Park Young-Gyu, *Han gwoneuro ingneun joseonwangjosillok*, 399.

²⁵ Park Young-Gyu, *Han gwoneuro ingneun joseonwangjosillok*, 399; JaHyun Kim Haboush, *The Great East Asian War and the Birth of the Korean Nation*, ed. William J. Haboush and Jisoo M. Kim (Columbia University Press, 2016), 27.

reports, one warning of imminent invasion and the other dismissing the threat.²⁶ The court accepted the more optimistic account, which left the kingdom unprepared for Toyotomi Hideyoshi's military ambitions.²⁷ On April 13, 1592, Japan launched a massive invasion with an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 troops and hundreds of warships.²⁸ Early Japanese successes were swift and devastating. However, Hideyoshi failed to anticipate three critical cultural and strategic factors: the rapid mobilization of Korea's civilian militias, the king's evacuation of the capital, and the effectiveness of the Joseon Navy.

The Righteous Army [의병], a civilian militia movement led by figures such as Kwak Jae-Woo [곽재우] (1552–1617), carried out guerrilla operations that disrupted Japanese supply lines.²⁹ King Seonjo's [선조] (r. 1567–1608) decision to flee the capital Hanyang [한양]—modern-day Seoul—though politically contentious, enabled the government to regroup and formally request military assistance from Ming China.³⁰ The arrival of Ming reinforcements in early 1593 helped recapture Pyongyang [평양],³¹ although coordination between Joseon and Ming forces remained inconsistent. Joseon troops under General Kwon Yul [권율] (1537–1599) achieved a major victory at Haengju [행주대첩],³² but intermittent Ming withdrawals exposed vulnerabilities in the alliance.³³ These developments set the stage for a prolonged conflict. Recognizing the need for unified naval leadership, the royal court appointed Admiral Yi as the Supreme Naval Commander of Three Provinces [삼도수군통제사], thereby elevating him to the highest naval position in the kingdom.

Admiral Yi's naval campaigns were instrumental in reversing the course of the war. His first major engagements in May 1592—Okpo [옥포], Hapdo [함포], and Jukjinpo [적진포]—resulted in the destruction of dozens of Japanese warships without a single Joseon loss.³⁴ These early victories secured control over southern waters and significantly boosted national morale. The second campaign marked the combat debut of the Turtle Ship, which played a crucial role in victories at Sacheon [사천], Dangpo [당포], and Danghangpo [당항포].³⁵ The vessel's "armored" shell and elevated artillery platform allowed it to charge directly into enemy formations, repel boarding attempts, and deliver concentrated cannon volleys. These engagements demonstrated the ship's effectiveness in close-quarters combat and its psychological impact on Japanese forces. The third campaign, launched in July 1592, involved coordinated efforts

²⁶ Haboush, *Great East Asian War*, 27.

²⁷ Haboush, *Great East Asian War*, 28–29; Ryu Seong-ryong, *Jingbirok*, 28.

²⁸ All dates hereafter are based on the lunar calendar, since that is how they were recorded in the primary records; Park Young-Gyu, *Han gwoneuro ingneun joseonwangjosillok*, 422; Haboush, *Great East Asian War*, 24; Hane and Perez, *Premodern Japan*, 157.

²⁹ Park Young-Gyu, *Han gwoneuro ingneun joseonwangjosillok*, 432; Haboush, *Great East Asian War*, 35.

³⁰ Ryu Seong-ryong, *Jingbirok*, 50; Ji-Young Lee, *China's Hegemony*, 110; Swope, "Crouching Tigers," 29.

³¹ Haboush, *Great East Asian War*, 71, 89; Ji-Young Lee, *China's Hegemony*, 111.

³² Ji-Young Lee, *China's Hegemony*, 111; Haboush, *Great East Asian War*, 107; Swope, *Dragon's Head*, 224; Swope, "Turning the Tide," 483.

³³ Swope, *Dragon's Head*, 216.

³⁴ Yi Sun-sin, *Imjin Changch'o*, 32–34; Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 85.

³⁵ Yi Sun-sin, *Nanjung Ilgi*, 5; Yi Sun-sin, *Imjin Changch'o*, 43–49; Shin Chae-Ho [신채호], *Yi Soon-Shin Jeon [이순신전]* [*The Tale of Yi Soon-Shin*], ed. Kim Sung-Min (iWell Contents, 2014), 24.

among the Left Jeolla Navy [전라좌수군], the Right Jeolla Navy [전라우수군], and remnants of the Right Gyeongsang Navy [경상우수군]. Admiral Yi's fleet—now comprising 3 Turtle Ships and more than 50 Pan-Ok Ships³⁶—confronted a dispersed Japanese force near Hansan-do [한산도]. Utilizing a feigned retreat to lure the enemy into open waters, Admiral Yi executed the famed crane-winged formation to annihilate the Japanese fleet. Of the 73 enemy vessels engaged, 58 were destroyed.³⁷ The Turtle Ships played a central role by absorbing enemy fire and breaking formation lines, allowing the larger fleet to encircle and bombard the opposition. The Battle of Hansan-do [한산도 대첩] (1592) is widely regarded as one of the most tactically brilliant victories in Korean history.

Following Hansan-do, Admiral Yi pursued the Japanese forces to the fortified port of Angolpo [안골포]. Despite the challenges posed by narrow straits and defensive structures, the Joseon Navy launched sustained assaults that destroyed or disabled numerous Japanese ships.³⁸ Although some enemy vessels escaped under cover of darkness, the campaign dealt a severe blow to Japan's maritime capabilities.³⁹ In response, Hideyoshi ordered his navy to avoid further engagements with Joseon forces, effectively relinquishing maritime control.⁴⁰ The fourth campaign culminated in the assault on Busan Harbor [부산포해전] in September 1592.⁴¹ Facing a fleet of nearly 470 anchored Japanese warships supported by fortified artillery positions,⁴² Admiral Yi's armada—now expanded to 74 vessels—initiated a direct attack. The Turtle Ships led the charge, absorbing heavy bombardment while creating openings for Pan-Ok Ships to fire upon and destroy enemy vessels.⁴³ Approximately 100 Japanese ships were demolished with minimal Joseon losses.⁴⁴ This operation further demonstrated the Turtle Ship's durability and offensive capacity, solidifying its reputation as an innovative warship.

During the ceasefire period (1593–1596), Admiral Yi expanded the fleet⁴⁵ and remained vigilant.⁴⁶ However, political interference at the Joseon court resulted in his dismissal in 1597. He was replaced by the military commander Won Kyun [원균] (1540–1597),⁴⁷ whose mismanagement led to the disastrous defeat at Chilcheollryang [칠천량해전] (1597),⁴⁸ where

³⁶ Yi Soon-Shin, *Nanjung Diary*, 43.

³⁷ Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 152.

³⁸ Yi Sun-sin, *Imjin Changch'o*, 60–61; Shin Chae-Ho, *Yi Soon-Shin Jeon*, 27.

³⁹ Yi Soon-Shin, *Nanjung Diary*, 48.

⁴⁰ Park Hee-Bong, *Gyogwaseoga Malhaji Aneun Imjinwaeran Iyagi*, 138.

⁴¹ Yi Soon-Shin, *Nanjung Diary*, 50.

⁴² Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 172; Shin Chae-Ho, *Yi Soon-Shin Jeon*, 28.

⁴³ Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 173; Park Hee-Bong, *Gyogwaseoga Malhaji Aneun Imjinwaeran Iyagi*, 139.

⁴⁴ Yi Sun-sin, *Imjin Changch'o*, 72–73.

⁴⁵ Park Jae-Gwang [박재광], "Haesangui Taengkeu, Geobukseon [해상의탱크, 거북선] [A Sea Tank, Turtle Ship]," *Gwahakgwa Gisul* [과학과기술] [Science and Technology] 9, no. 460 (2007): 46; Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 220.

⁴⁶ Yi Soon-Shin, *Nanjung Diary*, 145, 229; Yi Sun-sin, *Nanjung Ilgi*, 22, 29, 41, 45, 56, 59, 66, 74, 241.

⁴⁷ Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 252; Shin Chae-Ho, *Yi Soon-Shin Jeon*, 39.

⁴⁸ Yi Soon-Shin, *Nanjung Diary*, 418, 419, 420.

nearly the entire Joseon fleet was lost, including all Turtle Ships.⁴⁹ Reinstated with only 12 Pan-Ok Ships,⁵⁰ Admiral Yi quickly rebuilt the navy and, merely two months later, achieved a stunning victory at the Battle of Myeongryang. With just 13 Pan-Ok Ships against more than 300 Japanese vessels, his fleet inflicted heavy losses⁵¹ and halted Japan's northward advance.⁵² This triumph marked a critical point in restoring Joseon's naval strength and morale. In the final phase of the war, Admiral Yi and Ming naval forces intercepted the retreating Japanese fleet at the Battle of Noryang [노량해전] in November 1598.⁵³ The allied armada destroyed or captured hundreds of Japanese vessels,⁵⁴ but Admiral Yi himself and several high-ranking commanders—including Ming Naval Viceroy Deng Zilong (1531–1598)—were killed in action. This final engagement effectively ended the war and reshaped the geopolitical balance of early modern East Asia. Admiral Yi's naval legacy is inseparable from the Turtle Ship, which has become a symbol of Korean resilience and tactical brilliance.

2. Cinematography as a Gateway to History

South Korean films have emerged as compelling instruments for introducing wider audiences to the country's past, particularly viewers who lack access to or interest in academic scholarship. Director Kim Han-Min's trilogy—*The Admiral: Roaring Currents* (2014), *Hansan: Rising Dragon* (2022), and *Noryang: Deadly Sea* (2023)—as well as the KBS television series *The Immortal Yi Soon-Shin* (2004–2005) dramatize the Imjin War's naval campaigns and Admiral Yi's pivotal role. These productions translate complex historical events into immersive visual narratives, offering accessible points of engagement for both domestic and international audiences.

The Admiral: Roaring Currents centers on the Battle of Myeongryang, one of the most perilous engagements in the Joseon Navy's history. The film depicts Admiral Yi confronting an armada of 333 Japanese ships with only 13 Pan-Ok Ships.⁵⁵ The initial paralysis of the Joseon fleet is rendered with dramatic intensity,⁵⁶ culminating in Admiral Yi's lone command ship initiating the first assault. Although stylized, the film effectively communicates the battle's psychological strain and tactical dilemmas. It also highlights key environmental and structural factors, such as the powerful tidal currents of the Myeongryang Strait⁵⁷ and the

⁴⁹ Yi Soon-Shin, *Nanjung Diary*, 420; Shin Chae-Ho, *Yi Soon-Shin Jeon*, 41; Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 289.

⁵⁰ Ryu Seong-ryong, *Jingbirok*, 128.

⁵¹ Ryu Seong-ryong, *Jingbirok*, 130–131; Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 313, 318, 323; Shin Chae-Ho, *Yi Soon-Shin Jeon*, 47; Park Young-Gyu, *Han gwoneuro ingneun joseonwangjosillok*, 430.

⁵² Swope, "War and Remembrance," 170.

⁵³ Park Young-Gyu, *Han gwoneuro ingneun joseonwangjosillok*, 430.

⁵⁴ Ryu Seong-ryong, *Jingbirok*, 135; Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 355.

⁵⁵ *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* [명량], directed by Kim Han-Min [김한민] (Big Stone Pictures, 2014), 0:01:34, [online](#); Yi Soon-Shin, *Nanjung Diary*, 438; Ryu Seong-ryong, *Jingbirok*, 130; Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 313.

⁵⁶ *Admiral*, dir. Kim Han-Min, 1:05:15 to 1:06:54; Yi Soon-Shin, *Nanjung Diary*, 438; Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 314–317; Min'Ung Yi, "Role of the Chosŏn Navy," 133.

⁵⁷ *Admiral*, dir. Kim Han-Min, 1:08:17 to 1:11:42.

elevated decks of Joseon warships, which contributed to the Japanese fleet's disarray and the eventual Joseon victory.

Hansan: Rising Dragon, set in 1592, dramatizes the Battle of Hansan-do, one of Korea's most celebrated triumphs. Distinct from the other films, *Hansan* emphasizes intelligence gathering, espionage, and long-term strategy, resulting in a more methodical narrative pace. Opening with the Battle of Sacheon [사천해전] (1592)⁵⁸—the Turtle Ship's first historical deployment⁵⁹—the film introduces Wakizaka Yasuharu (1554–1626) as the principal antagonist. While some critics have noted the overabundance of characters and occasional geographic inaccuracies,⁶⁰ *Hansan* succeeds in portraying the strategic complexity of East Asian naval warfare. Its climactic bird's-eye perspectives on Admiral Yi's crane-winged formation, featuring the coordinated movement of the Korean fleet, is especially effective in conveying the scale and intensity of this particular engagement.⁶¹

Noryang: Deadly Sea concludes the trilogy by depicting Admiral Yi's final campaign and death in battle. Devoting most of its runtime to the climactic Battle of Noryang,⁶² the film underscores Admiral Yi's strategic insight and moral steadfastness. This focus reinforces both the battle's historical significance and the emotional gravity of the trilogy's conclusion. Collectively, these works demonstrate how historical cinematography can function as a gateway to public historical inquiry. By dramatizing pivotal battles and leadership decisions, they encourage audiences to explore Korea's history and reconsider Admiral Yi's legacy within broader cultural and historical frameworks. Although the Turtle Ship's historical deployment was relatively limited, it has transcended its original military purpose to become one of Korea's most enduring cultural icons. Its symbolic power stems not just from its innovative engineering but also from its embodiment of Korean resilience, ingenuity, and resistance to foreign aggression. South Korean visual media—particularly Kim Han-Min's trilogy—portray the Turtle Ship as more than a tactical vessel: it serves as a visual metaphor for national pride and historical agency. Among the trilogy, *Hansan* offers the most detailed and action-oriented depiction of the Turtle Ship. Unlike *The Admiral* and *Noryang*, where its presence is brief or symbolic,⁶³ *Hansan* showcases the ship in full combat, emphasizing its tactical advantages and psychological impact.⁶⁴ The film foregrounds internal debates within the Joseon Navy regarding the ship's capabilities, while portraying both Korean and Japanese forces anticipating its strategic role. Director Kim's decision to feature two models of the Turtle Ship—a gesture toward the ongoing scholarly debate over its historical structure—

⁵⁸ *Hansan: Rising Dragon* [한산:용의출현], directed by Kim Han-Min [김한민] (Big Stone Pictures, 2022), 0:04:55, [online](#).

⁵⁹ Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 104; Shin Chae-Ho, *Yi Soon-Shin Jeon*, 21.

⁶⁰ *Hansan*, dir. Kim Han-Min, 1:07:05 to 1:08:05.

⁶¹ *Hansan*, dir. Kim Han-Min, 1:31:50 to 1:32:13.

⁶² *Noryang: Deadly Sea* [노랑:죽음의바다], directed by Kim Han-Min [김한민] (Big Stone Pictures, 2023), 0:0:55, [online](#); Ji-Young Lee, *China's Hegemony*, 113; Swope, "War and Remembrance," 189.

⁶³ *Admiral*, dir. Kim Han-Min, 0:36:52 to 0:39:36; *Noryang*, dir. Kim Han-Min, 1:08:57 to 1:19:03.

⁶⁴ *Hansan*, dir. Kim Han-Min, 1:40:35 to 1:43:15.

adds interpretive depth and acknowledges the uncertainties that surround the vessel's original design.⁶⁵

Despite the Turtle Ship's absence from the actual battles of Myeongryang and Noryang, its inclusion in both films reinforces its prominence in Korean cultural memory. Originally deployed in 1592, the vessel has evolved into a national icon whose cinematic representation—regardless of historical accuracy—serves as an emblem of Korean resilience. *Noryang* depicts the Turtle Ship charging into battle before being destroyed early in the engagement.⁶⁶ Although historically inaccurate, this serves a dual purpose: it challenges the myth of the ship's invincibility while affirming its symbolic importance. By portraying its destruction, the film acknowledges both its vulnerability and its cultural resonance.

The Turtle Ship's symbolic evolution extends well into the modern era. During the Japanese colonial occupation (1910–1945), it reemerged as a representation of Korean technological achievement and resistance. In contemporary Korea, it is frequently invoked during periods of diplomatic tension, particularly in response to Japanese denialism regarding wartime atrocities. Whether intentionally or not, its cinematic representation engages deeply with modern audiences, reinforcing narratives of historical continuity and national pride. Among Korea's historical icons, few have proven as effective in mobilizing public sentiment as the Turtle Ship. Its portrayal in film not only commemorates past military successes but also affirms Korea's enduring resilience. This cultural resonance illustrates the broader role of media in shaping collective memory and sustaining historical consciousness.

3. *Balancing Accuracy and Artistic License*

The tension between historical fidelity and narrative symbolism remains central to historical filmmaking, and Kim Han-Min's trilogy navigates this tension through deliberate creative choices. While the films are grounded in documented events, they employ artistic license to heighten emotional impact and compensate for gaps in the historical record. Although such decisions are occasionally contentious, they expand the films' capacity to engage public audiences. In *The Admiral*, the Turtle Ship is depicted as having been reconstructed⁶⁷ after its documented destruction in 1597⁶⁸—a clear departure from historical evidence. Similarly, *Noryang* portrays Admiral Yi's youngest son, Myun [이변] (1577–1597), as dying in battle,⁶⁹ though records indicate that he had been killed in combat earlier and that his killer was executed.⁷⁰ These inaccuracies reflect the director's intent to intensify narrative tensions and underscore the emotional stakes of Admiral Yi's final campaign. *Hansan* adopts a more nuanced interplay between historical facts and artistic interpretations. The film expands a relatively short historical engagement into a feature-length narrative by incorporating

⁶⁵ *Hansan*, dir. Kim Han-Min, 1:41:05 to 1:42:43.

⁶⁶ *Noryang*, dir. Kim Han-Min, 1:08:57 to 1:19:03.

⁶⁷ *Admiral*, dir. Kim Han-Min, 0:36:52 to 0:39:36.

⁶⁸ Yi Soon-Shin, *Nanjung Diary*, 420; Yi Sun-sin, *Nanjung Ilgi*, 291; Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 287–289.

⁶⁹ *Noryang*, dir. Kim Han-Min, 0:14:45 to 0:22:02, 0:34:31 to 0:38:56.

⁷⁰ Yi Sun-sin, *Imjin Changch'o*, 231.

espionage, intelligence strategies, and character development. Though some critics have highlighted the overabundance of characters and occasional geographic inconsistencies—such as the misplacement of land battles in relation to naval stations⁷¹—the film succeeds in representing the Imjin War’s strategic complexities.

The Turtle Ship’s dramatic entrance—accompanied by a sound design that invokes a “roaring dragon”—illustrates how cinematic techniques can elevate historical artifacts into mythic symbols.⁷² Director Kim’s inclusion of both two-deck and three-deck models acknowledges scholarly debate and engages with the ambiguity of historical evidence.⁷³ This choice allows the film to honor the vessel’s legacy while acknowledging the limitations of available evidence. *Noryang* portrays the climactic battle as a large-scale international engagement involving 80 Joseon Pan-Ok Ships, 300 Ming vessels, and 500 Japanese warships.⁷⁴ The film dramatizes Admiral Yi’s decision to commit all available resources, diverging from his usual strategy of preserving naval strength for future operations.⁷⁵ This narrative shift underscores the urgency of the moment and the strategic imperative to prevent the Japanese retreat unchallenged. Historically, Admiral Yi sought to intercept Japanese reinforcements led by Shimazu Yoshihiro (1535–1619) to prevent a pincer movement⁷⁶ and endeavored to eliminate Konishi Yukinaga (1558–1600), a central figure in the initial invasion.⁷⁷ *Noryang*’s climax, including the accidental explosion aboard Ming Naval Viceroy Deng Zilong’s ship⁷⁸ and the rescue of Admiral Chen Lin (1543–1607),⁷⁹ is dramatized to heighten tension while loosely reflecting historical accounts. The final assault, which traps the Japanese fleet in a landlocked bay near Gwaneum-po [관음포], is portrayed as a moment of tactical brilliance.⁸⁰

The television series *The Immortal Yi Soon-Shin* offers a more comprehensive biographical account, blending documentary detail with dramatized sequences. Its portrayal of the Turtle Ship’s initial failure—capsizing under the weight of an iron roof—introduces a plausible engineering problem,⁸¹ while its subsequent modification with copper adds historical realism and narrative coherence. Across these productions, dramatic embellishments serve to emphasize Admiral Yi’s moral resolve and strategic innovation. His refusal to allow retreating enemy forces safe passage reflects tactical necessity and aligns with earlier Korean military victories—such as those at Salsu [살수대첩] in 612 against China’s Sui dynasty and at Gwiju

⁷¹ *Hansan*, dir. Kim Han-Min, 1:07:05 to 1:08:05.

⁷² *Hansan*, dir. Kim Han-Min, 1:40:35 to 1:43:15.

⁷³ *Hansan*, dir. Kim Han-Min, 1:41:05 to 1:42:43.

⁷⁴ Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 355.

⁷⁵ Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 359; *The Immortal Yi Soon-Shin* [불멸의이순신], season 1, episode 102, directed by Lee Sung-Joo [이성주] and Kim Jung-Gyu [김정규], written by Yoon Sun-Joo [윤선주] and Yoon Young-Soo [윤영수], aired 2004, KBS Drama Production, [online](#).

⁷⁶ Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 352.

⁷⁷ Swope, *Dragon’s Head*, 351.

⁷⁸ Swope, “Crouching Tigers,” 32.

⁷⁹ Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 357–358; Swope, *Dragon’s Head*, 353.

⁸⁰ Hwang Hyun-Pil, *Yi Soon-Shin Ui bada*, 356.

⁸¹ *Immortal Yi Soon-Shin*, season 1, episode 54, dir. Lee Sung-Joo and Kim Jung-Gyu, written by Yoon Sun-Joo and Yoon Young-Soo, aired 2004, KBS Drama Production, [online](#).

[귀주대첩] in 1019 against Khitan's Liao dynasty—which similarly culminated in the decisive annihilation of the invading forces to prevent future incursions. Ultimately, historical cinematography must balance narrative storytelling with historical integrity. Kim Han-Min's trilogy of films and the television series *The Immortal Yi Soon-Shin*, though dramatized, contribute meaningfully to public historical discourse. The Turtle Ship's enduring popularity in visual media—despite recurring simplifications—attests to its profound cultural significance. When approached critically, such portrayals enrich Korea's historical narrative and strengthen collective memory.

Conclusion

The cinematic revival of Admiral Yi Soon-Shin and the Turtle Ship reshaped how historical memory is constructed, accessed, and emotionally experienced in contemporary Korea. Through films like *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, *Hansan: Rising Dragon*, and *Noryang: Deadly Sea*, as well as the television series *The Immortal Yi Soon-Shin*, Korea's naval legacy has been reimagined not merely as a record of military victories but as a living narrative of resilience, innovation, and national identity. This study has demonstrated that historical cinematography serves as a vital gateway to public historical inquiry, particularly for audiences who engage more readily with visual media than academic texts. The dramatization of pivotal battles—especially Myeongryang, Hansan, and Noryang—creates an immersive experience that bridges gaps in the historical record and fosters a broader engagement with Korea's past. Although stylized, these portrayals render complex events both emotionally compelling and intellectually accessible. Thus, the Turtle Ship, central to both historical and cinematic narratives, has evolved into a powerful cultural symbol. Its depiction in visual media—whether as a symbolic presence or a fully realized combat warship—reinforces Korea's historical agency and challenges external distortions of its past. Director Kim Han-Min's decision to include various conceivable models of the Turtle Ship in *Hansan* reflects a thoughtful engagement with scholarly debate, while the vessel's dramatic prominence across the trilogy affirms its role as a visual emblem of national pride.

These portrayals also illuminate the ongoing tension between historical fidelity and artistic license. While the films and series employ creative liberties to heighten dramatic impact, such choices can enhance rather than diminish public understanding when interpreted critically. They complement scholarly research by inspiring curiosity, stimulating discussion, and broadening access to historical narratives. They do not supplant history—they amplify it. Ultimately, the convergence of history and media provides a dynamic space for cultural reflection. As Korea continues to articulate its historical narratives in both domestic and global arenas, the Turtle Ship endures as a symbol not only of wartime innovation but of lasting cultural and national significance. Its cinematic journey—from sixteenth-century battlefields to modern screens—underscores the transformative power of storytelling in shaping how nations remember, interpret, and reclaim their past.

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